

**JOSEPH C. HARSCH**

## On choosing sides

**T**HE big debate in Washington these days is over sanctions against South Africa.

It seems probable that there will be legislation of some sort and that President Reagan will accept it, reluctantly.

It will amount to United States intervention in the internal political affairs of South Africa. It will probably be ineffective. It may be counterproductive. It will be another example of the US blundering, albeit with good intentions, into a complex situation without first determining the US national interest and then thinking logically through to the most appropriate means to further those interests.

What is the US national interest in South Africa?

1. It is to the national interest of the US that South Africa remain inside the great trading community of North America, Western Europe, and Japan.

2. It is to the US national interest that military bases and military intelligence and communication facilities in South Africa be available to the armed forces of the NATO alliance, and not become available to the rival forces of the Soviet system of alliances and associations.

It follows from the above that friendly relations with the government of South Africa are desirable and in the US national interest, no matter who or what faction is in control of South Africa.

South Africa is going through a wrenching political change. The 24 million nonwhites are demanding with increasing insistence a share in the management of the entire country. The 4.5 million white minority will probably be forced sooner or later to give way to the rising tide of black nationalism.

The problem for US planners is how to manage US relations with South Africa during the transition in such a way that it remains in the Western military and economic orbit no matter what changes occur inside the country.

It should be remembered as Washington tries to think its way through this problem that the US does not have a national interest, per se, in either white or black dominance. It does have an interest in change coming as peacefully as possible with minimum dislocation of the South African economy.

The proper role for the US, therefore, is to avoid being the partisan of either whites or blacks in order to be available as an impartial mediator whenever such services can be helpful in smoothing the transition from all-white to mixed or black rule.

To repeat, it is not in the US national interest, per se, either that whites remain in control or that blacks take over control. It is in the US national interest that if there is to be change, it come about as peacefully as possible and without damaging US relations with the ultimately emergent government of South Africa.

In any incipient civil-war situation like this, the one thing to be avoided above all is to become so closely associated and identified with the ultimate losing faction that the US loses the ability to deal with the ultimate winning faction.

Iran is a case in point. The Shah of Iran left his throne in January 1979, never to return. That was 5½ years ago. There is still no communication between Washington and Tehran. The US became so much a partisan of the Shah's political party in Iran that it is still unable to find a bridge to normal relations with the winners.

It is not yet clear what will be the character and color of the ultimate government in South Africa. The only certainty is that it will not for all time be all white. The price of maintaining absolute white rule is running too high, both in human life and in damage to the economy. Over 625 blacks have been killed during the last year. Some American companies have already pulled out. Others are under mounting pressure to do the same.

The question pending in Washington is whether to do something to try to speed the transition away from white rule. The proper role for the US is to avoid being the cause of either speeding or delaying the process of change. As usual, the US will probably intervene more than is prudent or in the net national interest.